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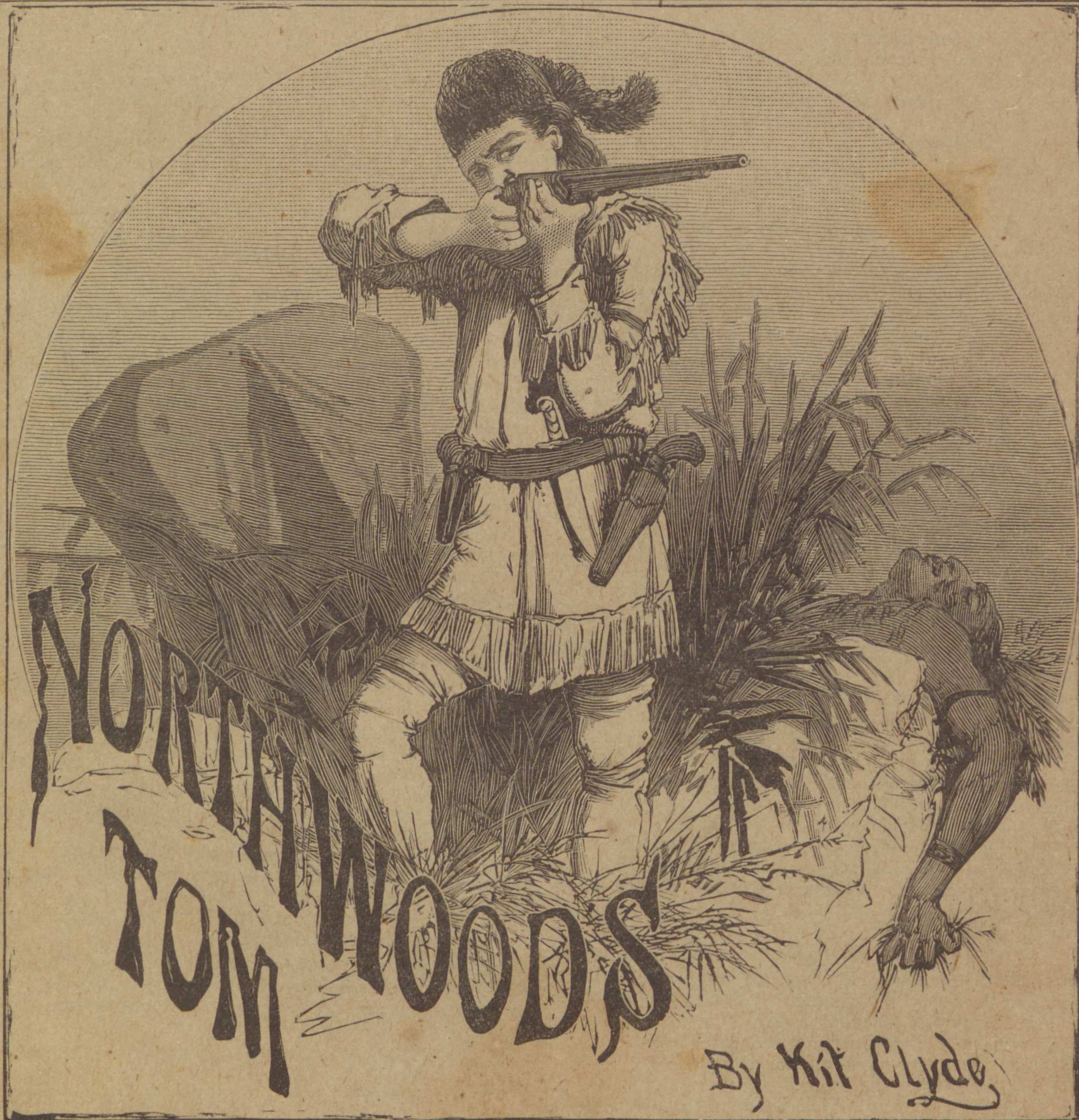
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NORTH WOODS TOM,

The Athlete Hunter.

By KIT CLYDE,

Author of "Silvershot," "Bow-and-Arrow Jack," "Fighting Joe; or, The Game Man of the Plains," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

RIFLE AGAINST RIFLE.

THE North Woods in autumn.

A more beautiful scene could scarcely be found anywhere in the world. The trees—beech, maple, and oak—all crimsoned with garments of glory, painted by the hand of the frost-king, are more than beautiful under the glittering rays of the October sunshine.

The dim aisles of the grand north woods are carpeted with the yellow, gold, and scarlet leaves, and even the hunter pauses oftentimes, and gives vent to an expression of delight, at the grand, resplendent beauty that nature presents to his eye.

Tom Hasty and Dell Jayne, young athletes from a lumber settlement near the central part of the Peninsula State, are ardent admirers of nature, as well as excellent shots with the rifle. Together they have come to the north woods of Michigan for a few weeks of sport with rifle, fishing-rod, and trap, and here we find them camped on the bank of a swift-flowing creek on the morning of an October day, in the year 1880.

The youthful hunters had brought along a small canvas tent, and some necessary articles for use in cooking their game, &c.

They had hired a horse and wagon at the railroad station ten miles from their present camping-ground, and the night before we meet them in the woods, the horse and wagon had departed for the station, driven by Indian Pete, a tall half-breed, who lived near the station.

"Well," said Tom, as he sat in front of the tent, in the mellow light of that October morning, "I suppose we are pretty near the heart of the hunting grounds of the North Woods, eh, Dell?"

"Oh, no, far from it," cried Dell quickly, as he looked up from an inspection of his Winchester sporting rifle. "Many hunters go a hundred miles north of here, but Nick Doane told me this was a good point for bears. I would rather capture a few of the black brutes than all the deer in the North Woods.

"How about the fur?"

"Plenty of mink, some rats and marten," said Dell.

"Well, I guess we'll get along well enough."

"Of course we will. I've been pretty nigh this place before."

"You have?"

"Yes," said Dell. "I've been all through the northern part of Newaygo county hunting, and we can't be many miles from the line, I'm thinking. This creek empties into the Pere Marquette, I haven't a doubt."

"You spoke of Nick Doane; who is he?"

"Haven't you ever heard of Nick Doane, Tom?"

"I don't remember the name."

"Well, that's strange. Nick is one of the best hunters in Michigan, or at least he used to be."

"Used to be?"

"Yes. He don't hunt much now, I take it. He's gone into the lumber trade, and is making money like dirt, I am told."

"Whereabouts is he?"

"Somewhere up north; I don't know exactly."

"Well, I don't suppose we will run across him in our tramps," said Tom. "Shall we put out our traps this morning, or take a scout through the woods and see how the land lays? You understand the business better than I do, Dell."

"We may as well set our traps along the creek first."

As the speaker rose to his feet the crackling of dry twigs reached the ears of both hunters.

"What was that, Dell?"

"A man. See, yonder he comes now."

Both hunters had raised their rifles, but they lowered them as they saw a white man approaching from down the creek, carrying a rifle in the hollow of his arm. As he approached, the young hunters noted the fact that he was tall and slightly stoop-shouldered, though far from being an old man. His face was dark, bronzed by sun and storm, and his eyes, keen black ones, glittered like points of steel from under a low, heavy brow.

"Who is it?" whispered Tom.

"Don't know," from Dell.

The stranger was not dressed in hunter's garb, wearing a suit of sheep's gray, such as farmers often clothe themselves with.

A belt was about the man's waist, from which depended a knife and revolver.

"Hello!" cried Dell Jayne, as the man came up.

"Hello, yourself, young man."

"Aint you lost, mister?" queried Tom, with a good-natured laugh.

"Not as anybody knows of," continued the stranger in an undertone that did not impress the youths favorably.

"You've got a pretty nice-looking gun," said Dell.

"How would you trade with me?"

The stranger did not deign to look at the speaker's Winchester, but, with a sneer, said:

"I wouldn't give a picayune for all the new-fangled rifles out. My old muzzle-loader here is better than anything else for hunting purposes."

"I don't agree with you," said Dell. "I consider myself a pretty good marksman."

"You don't want to shoot against me, though," growled the new-comer, as he allowed the breech of his rifle to slip to the ground, and sent a keen glance into the face of Dell Jayne.

"I'd as lief shoot against you as not," said Dell, with a laugh.

"That's it!" cried Tom. "I'll bet my old hat that Dell will beat you, stranger."

"No nonsense now," growled the man. "If you wish to shoot against me, well and good."

"Of course I do," said Dell. "I'm always willing to shoot for fun."

"I am not," said the stranger.

"What! do you refuse the test?"

"I can't shoot for fun. It's my gun against yours, or no match."

"Oh, that's your game, is it? Well, I don't know——"

"Shoot with him, Dell!" cried Tom. "Of course his old musket ain't worth much, but 'twill do to drive stakes."

"No smartness now," growled the man. "If you aren't afraid to shoot, come on."

"I never take a dare from anybody," cried Dell.

"What's your distance, young man?"

"Anywhere from ten to eighty rods."

"We will call it forty rods, then," said the stranger.

"Very good. Tom, will you pace it off and set up a mark?"

Of course Tom, who was spoiling for the sport to begin, complied with alacrity, and soon the mark, a slip of white paper two inches square, was pinned to the trunk of a beech that stood in fair view on the bank of the creek, forty rods away.

"You fire first," said Dell.

"How is it? One shot?"

"No; best two in three."

"All right."

The stranger raised his long rifle and glanced along the barrel.

A second only, then the rifle spoke.

Tom, who had withdrawn but a few feet, went to the tree and examined it. The stranger's bullet had grazed the mark on the lower left-hand corner. Tom placed his finger there so that the two might see.

"Pretty good for you!" cried Dell. "You're hard to beat, I see."

The stranger began reloading without reply.

Dell threw his gun to his face and fired. His bullet cut the mark on the right, being half a bullet better than his opponent.

Without a word, Dell's opponent took his place and fired a second time.

But this time his bullet fell three inches below the spot.

Dell laughed.

"I can easily beat you now, my man," he said, in his bantering, good-natured way.

At this shot Dell Jayne sent a ball to the center of the mark.

"Hip, hip, hooray!" shouted Tom, throwing up his cap and dancing about the tree, wild with delight at his friend's victory.

"Your friend acts the fool to perfection," growled the man. "I suppose he calls this thing fair, but I don't."

"You have lost your rifle," said Dell. "I never yet met a man who could shoot with me."

"Blowhard," hissed the stranger.

"What is that, sir?"

"I say that you are a miserable braggart," retorted the man. "Perhaps you don't know who you have been dealing with, my young rooster?"

"No, I don't; neither do I care," said Dell. "There's no call for you to get mad."

"Maybe not. My name is Gabriel Grout—you have heard of me?"

"No."

"Most people in these parts have. I own all the wild land in Nawaygo and Lake counties, and I have forbidden any one hunting here. That's why I came this morning to see you. One of my agents reported the fact of your coming, to me, last night. He saw you at the station, and Indian Pete told him that two young boys were coming into my woods. You must not hunt here, boys. I strictly forbid——"

"What's the old hunchback trying to get through his

noddle now?" cried Tom, who had come up in time to catch the last words of the pretended land-owner.

"Blast me if I know," and Dell burst into an amused laugh.

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERIOUS SHOT.

THE good nature of Dell Jayne seemed to add fuel to the flame of Gabriel Grout's anger. He smote the breech of his rifle with his fist, and glared savagely upon the two young hunters.

"You've lost your old shooter," said Tom. "Dell beat you clear out o' sight, old man."

"You lie, you young reprobate."

"Look out, old chap, or I may take a notion to resent your free use of words," retorted Tom, who though one of the best-natured fellows in the world, was quick to resent an insult.

"I say you lie, when you tell me that your friend here won the match."

"Goodness, man, are you crazy? You can look at the tree yourself."

"No good in that," retorted Grout. "You stood at the tree and pointed out the shots. Of course you could make it appear that your friend's bullet went nearer every time. Ah, your little game's too thin, young man, altogether too thin."

The sneering words of the man hurt Tom's feelings badly. He clenched his hands, and advanced a step toward the speaker.

"I don't allow anybody to call me a liar," he said, bluntly. "If you repeat those words—nay, if you don't take 'em back, I'll flog you within an inch of your life."

Tom Hasty meant what he said, and Gabriel Grout realized the fact.

"Well, well," he said, in a less severe tone, "I may be mistaken, but I shan't give you my rifle. I have reason to suspect something wrong anyhow."

"Yes, you will. Dell won the rifle fairly, and he shall have it."

The two men glared angrily into one another's eyes.

Dell Jayne, who seldom lost his temper, interfered at this point in the interest of peace.

"Never mind, Tom," he said. "I don't care a cent for Mr. Grout's rifle. We had the fun of shooting, which was all I cared for anyhow."

"But," cried Tom, "if he had come out best he would insist on taking your rifle."

"I cannot judge of that."

"But I can," persisted Tom. "Such scamps always whine when they are beat, and if they chance to win always demand more than their due."

"That statement is a lie."

Tom turned suddenly to find Gabriel Grout, white and trembling with rage.

"You have called me a liar once too many times," cried Tom.

"Take that, you young whelp."

Grant struck at Tom with the muzzle of his rifle, but the youth saw the movement in time to avoid the stroke, and in return he dealt the man a blow with his fist that sent him sprawling to the ground.

As the stranger leaped to his feet, foaming with wrath, Tom Hasty dealt him a blow under the ear that sent his enemy once more to grass. Then he picked up the man's rifle and handed it to Dell.

"Here is your rifle, Dell. Take it, and if this fellow says anything, I'll break his head."

Dell took the rifle for the time being, and then tried to reconcile the combatants.

"He picked the fuss," cried Tom, "and I mean to give him enough of it before I am through with him."

"I think this trouble had better end right here," cried Dell.

Tom stood ready to receive Gabriel Grout once more, but the irate land-owner did not make a third assault. His nose was bleeding from the first blow, and his head was in a dizzy whirl from the effects of the second, so that the fellow had no desire to test Tom Hasty's abilities further.

Wiping the blood from his face with a dirty pocket-handkerchief. Grout addressed himself to Dell Jayne, and demanded his rifle.

"Don't you give it to him, Dell," cried Tom.

But Dell handed over the gun, unheeding the remonstrance of his friend.

"You're a plaguey fool, Dell."

"Don't fly off the handle, Tom. The gun is of no use to me, and I am perfectly satisfied in returning it."

Gabriel Grout received the gun with a muttered curse.

His face was black as a thundercloud, and there was an evil glow emitted from his sinister black eyes.

"You'd better dig out now," said Tom. "You're the meanest specimen we have run across since we came north, and 'twon't be healthy for you to remain in this neighborhood."

"You hint at murder, I see," growled the man.

"Nonsense," said Tom. "Don't get on your high horses again, because if you do, I may feel called upon to give you another thumping."

"Tom, don't quarrel with the fellow."

"He's quarreling with me."

"I'll do something besides quarrel, if you don't leave these woods."

"How is that?" queried Tom.

"I have explained to your friend here. My name is Gabriel Grout."

"A real handsome name."

"You have heard of me?"

"Well, maybe," said Tom. "Seems to me I've heard of the angel Gabriel, but I'm blessed if I believe you are even a relative of his."

"You are pleased to be facetious," snapped Grout, "but you may laugh out on the other side of your mouth before you are many hours older. You are trespassing here, and I will give you just twelve hours to get out of the country."

"You are awful liberal," sneered Tom.

"I own all of this land, and I forbid your hunting here. I am the biggest land-owner north of the Grand Rapids, if you did but know it."

"I believe you are lying now," said Tom.

"You don't want to be caught here to-morrow at this time, I can tell you that," retorted Grout, as he shouldered his rifle.

"Good gracious! I'd like to see you help yourself, old Humpy," cried Tom, with a jeering laugh.

The man strode away without reply, and his tall form was soon lost in the woods.

"By thunder!" exclaimed Tom, "what a grouty old scamp that was to be sure. You don't imagine he owns any land, do you, Dell?"

"No. He was only trying to frighten us," returned Dell. "He is a hunter like ourselves, and likely enough there's a good lot of game around here, and he thought if he could drive us away, he'd have the whole field to himself, don't you see?"

"That's a fact," said Tom. "I guess he's given up the notion of scaring folks by this time, though."

"I guess so, too. You thumped him good, Tom. I really felt sorry for the poor fellow."

"I couldn't help thrashing him," said Tom. "He called me a liar once too often. He's a mean scamp, else he would have offered to turn over his rifle when he was fairly beaten. Wonder where he holds forth, anyhow?"

"Don't know. In some lumber shanty I presume."

"Are there any shanties near here, think you?"

"I shouldn't wonder," returned Dell. "We are in the Pere Marquette lumber region now, and there must be some shanties and loggers not far off. You know this is

the season for cutting and skidding logs, preparatory to drawing on bobs when the snow comes."

"Exactly," said Tom. "Wonder how near I could come to that mark?"

As he spoke the young hunter raised his rifle, and after a second's aim fired. Almost with the report of Tom's gun came another, and a bullet grazed the cheek of young Hasty, starting the blood freely.

Instantly Tom clapped his hand to his face, where he felt a tingling sensation. He withdrew his hand stained with blood.

"By thunder, Tom, you are shot!" exclaimed his companion in alarm.

"Only a scratch. 'Twas a mighty close call though," said Tom Hasty, as he gazed sharply about him.

"How did it happen?"

"Well, answer that question yourself," returned Hasty. "Somebody shot at me, that's certain."

"A stray bullet from some hunter's rifle."

"Meant for my life nevertheless," said Tom, grimly.

"Why should you think so?"

"Look here, Dell, I'm not fool enough to think a stray bullet did this. Where is the hunter? Why don't he put in an appearance?"

"He can't be far off," said Dell, halloing at the top of his voice. But no answer was vouchsafed.

"You see," said Tom, "you were mistaken."

"It's strange," muttered Jayne.

"Not so strange as you may think. Now from which quarter did the bullet come?"

"I can't say. Your gun went off about the same time, and I hardly realized what had happened until I saw blood on your face, Tom."

"Perhaps we'd better look out, or a second shot may prove more effectual. That shot was meant to put an end to my earthly career, and old Gabriel fired it—the murderer."

"By thunder, Tom, it does look that way."

"Let's hunt him out, Dell."

The two young men set out at once to scour the woods in the vicinity of their camp.

Tom found, after a short search, the imprint of a foot upon the yielding soil near the creek, and at once concluded that it must be the footprints of the would-be assassin.

He resolved to follow the trail at any rate, and see what he could find.

The trail led down the stream to a small tree which had fallen across the water. Across this Tom passed, and found the footprints on the other side.

"I'm on the right track now," muttered the young hunter, as he peered eagerly ahead. Not dreaming that the trail would lead him far, Tom struck out at a rapid walk in pursuit of his enemy, forgetting Dell for the time, under the impress of this new excitement.

CHAPTER III.

AN ADVENTURE—TOM AND VIOLA.

TOM forgot the beauties of the forest in his eager pursuit of the man who had fired the shot at himself.

There seemed to be no attempt to hide the trail and the young hunter experienced no trouble in following it. For an hour Tom pressed on, then, of a sudden, he came to a halt and dropped the breech of his rifle to the ground.

A sound fell on his ear.

He listened intently and soon distinguished the steady strokes of an ax.

"Goodness!" ejaculated the youth; "can't be that there are settlers in this out of the way section?"

Throwing his gun across his arm, the youth moved forward.

But a few steps had he gone when he was not a little startled at hearing a loud, piercing scream, which could only come from the throat of a frightened female.

Grasping his rifle tightly, Tom pushed his way forward through a thicket, which alone obstructed his view.

He emerged into a little glade, and then his keen eye took in a most interesting, as well as startling, tableau.

A huge pine had fallen long years before, and lay across the glade, its surface moss-grown with age.

Near one end of the fallen tree stood a young girl.

At her feet lay a heap of autumn leaves which she had evidently collected from the forest; on the log, at her side, a dark straw hat had fallen, its bright ribbons contrasting strongly with the dingy brown of the old pine.

The girl wore a brown dress and pink apron, without other ornaments than a narrow frill of white at the throat and wrists. Her hair, of dark brown, hung in disheveled masses about neck and shoulders, framing as beautiful a face as Tom Hasty had ever looked upon.

That face was white as death now, the large blue eyes dilating with abject terror.

The cause of the girl's fright was plainly visible.

A huge black bear occupied the opposite end of the pine, and evidently was fully as much astonished as was the girl. He had reared upon his hind legs, and stood regarding the maiden in evident wonder.

Tom Hasty took in the situation at a glance.

Without a moment's reflection he raised his Winchester and fired—once, twice, thrice.

With a howl of pain the bear sprang from the log, and attempted to reach its new enemy; but in this the brute failed, as a fourth shot from the young hunter's repeating rifle brought Mr. Bruin down, and, after a few contortions, the brute lay silent in death.

Tom advanced and stood beside the dead bear.

"He is dead fast enough," he said, then turned his attention to the girl, who leaned heavily against the fallen pine, white as death, trembling in every limb.

"There is no cause for further alarm, Miss," said Tom. "I hope you are not harmed."

"No, only frightened," said the girl, after recovering a little from her terror. "I owe my life to you."

Tom laughed good humoredly.

"I don't believe the bear would have harmed you," he said, "but there is no danger now, at all events."

Tom refilled the magazine of his rifle with cartridges while the girl readjusted her hat.

Then she held out her hand with a smile.

"You are a brave boy," she said, as he grasped her hand, "and I still believe I owe my life to you. You do not belong here. I have never met you before."

"We have met to-day for the first time, that's certain," returned Tom, thrilled by the touch of the girl's hand. "My name is Tom Hasty, and I am here for the first time, on a hunting excursion. This is my first game," and he pointed to the bear.

"You have not been in this vicinity long?"

"Since yesterday only," he said. "I hear the sound of an ax. You live near here?"

The girl blushed under the ardent gaze of Tom.

"We are to stop here for this winter," she said. "My uncle is cutting logs for Shields & Wells of Ludington."

"Your uncle?"

"Yes. I am an orphan, and have lived with Uncle John and Aunt Sarah Granger since I can remember."

"Your name is Granger, then?"

"Oh, no," with a smile. "I am only Viola Day. My mother was a Granger."

"Ah, yes, I see," said Tom. "I suppose you enjoy yourself immensely in the woods? There's a chance for it anyhow."

A cloud suddenly swept the face of the girl.

"I thought I should enjoy myself better here than at home, but just when I was taking the most comfort he came and spoilt everything."

"He?"

"Oh dear, what am I saying?" cried Viola suddenly, as if just remembering that she was making a confidant of a stranger. "But I don't care though. I hate him, and I don't care who knows it."

Tom laughed at the girl's earnestness.

"I'm dead mystified," he said. "Won't you tell me who you refer to?"

"Who could I mean but Gabriel."

"Gabriel Grout?"

"Yes. You know him, then, Mr. Hasty?"

"Can't say that I am very well acquainted with the chap," said Tom; "seeing as I met him for the first time to-day; but I guess he'll remember Tom Hasty for one while. So Gabriel Grout is the man you hate? I don't wonder at it. He's about as mean a man as I ever run afoul of. This Mr. Grout is a great land-owner, isn't he?"

"Gabriel Grout a land-owner?" cried Viola, as if puzzled.

"Yes. He told me he owned most of the land in Newaygo and Lake counties."

The girl laughed, then, outright.

"Well, that is one of his old tricks," she said. "Gabriel Grout is nothing but a log-scaler. He will scale on Uncle John's job this winter. He isn't doing anything just now, only persecuting me whenever he can."

"I knew the scamp was lying," cried Tom. "He made a great spread over his vast tracts of fine land. What do you think, he ordered Dell and me to leave the woods and not trespass on his land."

"He is very impudent."

"I should say so."

Tom made no mention of the shot which came near terminating his mortal career, nor of the cause of his presence in this part of the forest.

"If you will come to the shanty, I am sure Uncle John will be glad to see you, Mr. Hasty. I don't think I shall dare venture so far from the shanty again. I had no idea there were bears in the woods."

Tom was deeply interested in the artless young forest girl, and, forgetting for a time his errand of vengeance, he walked along beside Viola, carrying her string of autumn leaves, chatting quite freely meantime with his new acquaintance.

They had gone but a short distance when they came to an opening in the woods. Here were three log shanties, one used for the men, one for stabling purposes, and the third and smallest as eating and cook shanty.

Toward this latter Viola led the way.

Several men were in front of the stables, having just come in with their cattle, great oxen used for skidding the logs. As yet, the hauling teams had not come to the woods. The first snow would bring them.

A man, stout and grizzled, came out of the cook's shanty just as Tom and his fair friend came up.

"Oh, Uncle John!" exclaimed Viola, rushing forward, throwing her arms about the old logger, giving him such a hug as to make the watching Tom envious.

"Well, well, what's the matter now?" grunted the old man, as he disengaged his niece's hands from about his person and held her off at arm's length.

"I've had such an adventure!"

"Ah, indeed! Fell into the creek, I s'pose."

"No; but a great big bear came near eating me up!"

"A delicate morsel for a bear," chuckled the old logger. "I s'pose you screeched and frightened the old fellow away; eh, Viola?"

"No!" cried the girl, turning quickly toward Tom. "This gentleman saved my life!"

Then she gave a hasty account of her adventure, and wound up by introducing young Hasty to her uncle.

"Well, well, my boy, I am glad to meet you—terrible glad," said the old logger, wringing the young hunter cordially by the hand. "Go inside; Sarah's got dinner near ready."

Tom was no way loath to comply, and quickly followed Viola into the house. He found "Aunt Sarah" a far less pleasing person than her stout, good-natured spouse.

She was tall, very tall, and lean, with a thin face, long

pointed nose, and a pair of the sharpest eyes Tom had ever looked upon.

"My," muttered the youth, "but I must go slow here, else I'll catch fits."

The woman merely nodded her thin head without uttering a word, when her niece presented Tom Hasty.

The young hunter ate dinner with the skidders that day, and lingered about the shanty an hour later, talking with Viola, ere he bethought himself that Dell would wonder at his long absence.

"I must go," he said at length, as he stood with Viola just outside the shanty.

"I hope we shall see you again, Mr. Hasty."

"Undoubtedly," said Tom.

He pressed her hand, and with a parting word he hastened away.

Just as he was entering the edge of the forest, Tom ran suddenly upon Gabriel Grout.

"Hello!" exclaimed the youth, "here you are again. By thunder, Mr. Gabriel, you're the scamp who shot at me to-day"

"Shot at you?"

The man showed a pair of extremely white teeth.

"Yes, shot at me, you old scamp. I've a notion to thump you again for it."

CHAPTER IV.

A TREACHEROUS SHOT.

"HAVE a care, young man," growled Gabriel Grout, with a grit of his teeth, "I am on my own ground now."

"Is that so? You pretended to be on your own land this morning, but you lied then as you are lying now."

"Scoundrel!"

The scaler aimed a savage blow at Tom's head with his rifle, but the mark refused to stand, and in consequence the irate man's gun struck the ground with such force as to shatter the stock.

Tom laughed provokingly loud at the mishap.

"Go home now, and mend your old musket," said Tom.

"Look out! Don't you make another pass at me, or down you go."

With a scowl, the scaler gathered up the remains of his rifle and hurried away, showing his teeth as he passed Tom.

"Go, you old hermudgeon," cried Tom. "Next time you'll know better than to interfere with your betters, I reckon."

No answer came from the enraged Grout. He hurried forward and gained the cook's shanty, while Tom pushed his way once more into the forest.

Viola was still standing outside as the scaler came up.

"Look there, Miss Viola," and Gabriel Grout held up his shattered rifle for her inspection.

"Did you encounter a bear, Mr. Grout?"

"No; I met something far worse."

"A panther perhaps?"

"No, no. You know well enough who it was that ruined my gun, Viola."

"How should I know?" innocently.

"Because the young scamp has been here, and left your side not twenty minutes ago."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Viola. "You are most severe on the gentleman who dined with us this noon. You ought to beg his pardon——"

"Gentleman!" sneered Grout, showing his teeth, while a baleful glow filled his evil black eyes.

"If that sneaking young hunter is a gentleman, or is even possessed of one spark of gentlemanly feeling, then I don't know the meaning of the term."

"Perhaps you do not!" said Viola. "Mr. Hasty saved my life."

"Ah, there's where the shoe pinches," snarled the scaler. "Better look out, Viola. The young scamp has a handsome face, but he's Satan's helper, and don't you forget it. He attempted to murder me this morning."

The blue eyes of Viola opened wide in questioning astonishment.

"Attempted to murder you?"

"That's what I said."

"Nonsense."

"No, it's not nonsense by any means," retorted Gabriel Grout. "The man you call Hasty fired at me this morning with murderous intent. Perhaps you can see the mark of his bullet on my face now," and the man exhibited a dark spot under his ear where Tom's clenched hand had fallen early that morning.

"That doesn't look like the work of a bullet," said the girl.

"It is, just the same," said Grout. "I had a mighty close call for my life. I mean to get even with the young rascal some day."

"You would hardly dare to utter your threats in the presence of Mr. Hasty."

"Wouldn't I?"

"Certainly not. You are too much of a coward."

The scaler's cheek paled, and his eyes seemed to shoot forth flames of steel as these words fell from the lips of his employer's niece.

His form trembled, and, for the time, Gabriel Grout could not utter a word.

"You choose to insult me, I see," he finally articulated; "I thought better of you than this, Viola."

"You forced me to speak as I did," returned the girl, "I had no wish to even exchange a word with you."

At this moment the shanty door opened and a sharp face looked out upon the couple.

"Ah, it's you is it, Gabriel? Come in, please, I wish to speak with you. Besides, you haven't had your dinner."

"I don't care for any," growled Grout, but he complied with the woman's request all the same, and entered the shanty, leaving Viola still outside.

"What a cold-blooded lizard," said the girl to herself. "I shudder every time he puts them snaky eyes of his on my face. Ugh! I hate that man without knowing why. I know Uncle John would laugh at my fears if I should speak them aloud, but I do believe Gabriel Grout would as lief take a life if he could gain by the act."

"What were you saying to Viola?" questioned Mrs. Granger, the moment the evil-eyed scaler crossed the threshold and closed the door behind him.

Grout thrust his broken rifle under one of the benches next the wall, ere he replied:

"I was trying to enlist her sympathy, that's all."

"In what way?"

"By showing her how badly I had been misused by Tom Hasty."

"The young hunter who just left?"

"Yes."

"You were a noodle then, Gabriel," asserted the woman, with considerable emphasis. "If you continue to make such blunders, I'll drop your case entirely."

"Blunders? How have I blundered?"

"By trying to solicit sympathy from Viola in the way you did. Pish! You might know you would only raise this young hunter several notches in her estimation."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Of course not. You aren't a bit sharp, Gabriel Grout. Viola is a pretty girl, and this young hunter, who, by the way, killed a bear that she imagined was about to devour her, has a handsome face, which is liable to remain long in the memory of a susceptible girl like Viola. To succeed you must ignore this young hunter altogether."

"But he may refuse to be ignored. If he has taken a fancy to Viola, he will not be satisfied with his one visit here."

"Well, in that case matters may become complicated, but until then it is your duty to push your own claims, and leave this young hunter alone," asserted Mrs. Granger.

"I suppose so, but Viola won't listen to me of late," groaned the scaler.

"She's a girl of spirit, and would be wooed as such."

To this Gabriel made no reply.

The fact was he knew full well that Viola was a girl of spirit, as he had found to his chagrin on more than one occasion, and he therefore valued Mrs. Granger's remarks on the subject for what they were worth.

"Sarah, you are not more than half interested," he finally said. "I have listened to your councils long enough, and have resolved to work on my own hook hereafter."

"As you please," snarled the woman. "I hate this young upstart, with her pretty face and sickly blue eyes; I hate her, Gabriel, and that's why I would help you secure her for a wife. The little jade has completely ousted me in John's affections, and the next thing I know she'll be assuming the airs of mistress. But if you don't care for my help so be it. I'm not particular," and with a toss of her head, the sharp-faced Mrs. Granger turned and walked to the far end of the shanty, where she had been engaged in washing the dinner-dishes but a few minutes before.

Gabriel stood gazing moodily at the floor for some moments in silence. Finally he walked over to the side of the gaunt woman at the rude sink, and laid his hand on her thin, bony shoulder.

"Sarah, forgive me."

No answer.

"Won't you forgive me, Sarah? I meant not half I said. I still need your help, and only with it can I hope to succeed."

There was a pleading whine in his voice that was quite comical, as coming from this man to a woman like the gaunt Mrs. Granger.

She turned suddenly and faced the scaler.

"I will help you if you will stop your whining hereafter, and follow my advice," she said, with uncommon emphasis.

"I'll do it, Sarah."

The two schemers were once more on friendly terms, ready to plot the destruction of Viola Day, and whoever else might step in to assist the fair girl.

After that Gabriel set about repairing the stock to his rifle, which occupied the large part of the afternoon.

Just before dark Gabriel shouldered the repaired gun and left the shanty, going directly into the forest.

Some of the men had come in from their work, but the log-contractor was still in the woods, and it was of him Gabriel was thinking as he entered the forest.

About half a mile from the shanty, Gabriel came to the bank of the creek, which passed near the shanties. Several skidways had been made here, and there were plenty of brush heaps all about, formed by the tops of the fallen pines.

Close up beside a tree Gabriel paused and peered sharply about, as if expecting to see some one.

Although the shadows of night were falling his keen glance was rewarded. The form of a man appeared on the far side of one of the skidways. He was apparently examining the logs.

After a moment's scrutiny the scaler seemed satisfied of his man, and raised his rifle.

A hush most oppressive rested over the pine woods.

The report of a rifle broke the stillness.

The moon on the skidway had disappeared. The assassin's rifle had been well-aimed and his bullet had found a life.

CHAPTER V.

A TROUBLED CONSCIENCE.

It was a half hour after dark. The men, skidders and choppers, had finished their supper and left for their own shanty.

Viola and her aunt sat in the firelight. The dishes remained untouched as the hungry lodgers had left them. A troubled look rested on the face of the young girl.

"I wonder what keeps Uncle John so late," said Viola.

"There's enough to keep him," returned Mrs. Granger. "He has a heap of things to look after. I don't wonder at his absence, but I noticed that Gabriel Grout wasn't with the men. He ate no dinner, and now, here 'tis an hour after dark, and he has put in no appearance for supper. I wonder what keeps him."

Viola made no reply.

"Viola," said her aunt, suddenly, "Gabriel Grout is a very nice man; don't you think so?"

"What put such thoughts into your head, Aunt Sarah?"

"I was thinking how nice it would be if you and Gabriel would only make a match."

The maiden laughed.

"Well, I declare, Aunt Sarah, you are a born match-maker, but this time you will fail; I almost hate Gabriel Grout. I wouldn't marry him if he was the last man on earth."

The sharp eyes of Mrs. Granger glittered angrily.

"Your head is full of silly notions, Viola," she said, tartly. "I know that you could not do better than to marry Gabriel Grout."

"Perhaps not, neither could I do worse. But this won't wash the dishes," and Viola sprang to her feet and went about cleaning the long table.

While thus engaged the door opened, and Gabriel Grout came in. His face was pale, and his eyes roamed about the room restlessly.

Going to one corner of the shanty, he set his gun in the angle, and then shuffled to the fire and began rubbing his hands together nervously.

"You are late, Gabriel; we have been waiting supper for you," said Mrs. Granger.

"You are very kind, but I am not over hungry to-night."

"Are you ill?—you look white as a ghost."

"Do I?" forcing a laugh. "Well, I haven't been feeling very well for a week past, that's a fact."

"Have you seen Uncle John, Mr. Grout?"

It was Viola who put the question suddenly. She had ceased her work and was leaning her white, rounded arms on the long table, peering over questioningly at the scales.

"What?" he cried, turning suddenly, and nearly falling over a bench in his nervousness.

"Have you seen Uncle John to-night?"

"Oh, yes; I saw him just before dark—that is, about four o'clock, I should think."

"Where?"

"On his way to look after some skidways."

"But have you seen nothing of him since?"

"Nothing. Hasn't he been in to-night?"

"No."

"Over to the men's shanty, likely," said Grout, turning his back to Viola, and contemplating the coals thoughtfully.

"I will go and see."

Viola started to leave the room, but was prevented by the sudden opening of the door.

With a glad cry Viola bounded forward to throw her arms about the neck of her uncle, who just then crossed the threshold.

"Well, well, little girl," kissing her as he spoke, "you are a veritable bear, you hug a fellow so fiercely. I am late for supper I see."

"Indeed, you are. Where have you been keeping yourself so late, Uncle John?"

"Out around, looking after matters," said the logger.

"Good gracious! what's the matter with Mr. Grout?"

All eyes were turned toward the scaler, who stood staring blankly into the face of the old logger, his face as white as death, his tall frame shaking as though in an ague fit.

When Gabriel Grout saw that he had drawn the attention of all to himself, he swallowed the lump that had gathered in his throat, and with an effort said:

"Why are you all looking at me? I ain't very well to-night, but is that any reason for this great fuss?"

"You look so white and scared," said Mrs. Granger. "Really, Gabriel, you must be sick. Perhaps we'd best send a man to the station for a doctor."

The scaler forced a laugh then.

"Don't trouble yourself, my dear Mrs. Granger," he said. "I'm not so bad off as all that comes to."

"I don't think Mr. Grout has appeared well since Tom Hasty shot him to-day," said Viola, by way of tantalizing the scaler.

"What is that?" cried Mrs. Granger, catching quickly at the words of Viola. "Did somebody shoot at you, Gabriel?"

"I should not have mentioned it, but since your niece has seen fit to speak of it, I may as well tell the facts."

"Certainly," said John Granger, with a very grave face. "I will be ready for supper in a moment, Viola. Go on, Gabriel."

"I was out on a hunt this morning," said Grant, "and strayed at least four miles south of here to the banks of a small creek, the one which passes these shanties, I think. On the bank of this creek I ran upon a tent which contained two young wen. Greeting them in a friendly way, I remained a short time in their company, and then started on my return."

"I hadn't gone over eighty rods from the camp when I heard the report of a rifle, and a bullet grazed my neck. Whirling quickly, I saw the young fellow calling himself Tom Hasty running through the woods."

"At first, I thought of following and punishing him for his murderous attempt on my life, but second thought convinced me that it would be better to return here at once."

"What motive could the young man have, think you?" queried John Granger. "I thought Mr. Hasty a frank, open-hearted young fellow, but then one can't always tell."

"His motive was money, I presume."

"Money?"

"Yes. You see I was foolish enough to mention the fact of my having a hundred dollars on my person. The way I came to speak of it was in bantering the young chaps to shoot with me."

"Ah, yes," said Granger. "This must be looked into. If there are murderers in these woods——"

"Uncle John!"

"Eh, Viola?"

"Do you believe a word of this nonsense?"

"Well, well," ejaculated the old logger, opening his eyes to their widest extent. "What has my little girl to say about it?"

"But little, uncle. I am sure that Mr. Grout slanders Tom Hasty, when he accuses him of attempting his life."

A smile swept the face of Granger, which was quickly followed by a very grave look.

"You have my word as to the facts," said Gabriel Grout, "Of course your niece knows nothing of the affair, only as young Hasty may have colored it."

"Mr. Hasty made no mention of the affair," cried Viola. "He is too much a gentleman to speak disparagingly of any one."

"Indeed," sneered the scaler. "Your niece must have learned much in a very short space of time. If I mistake not, to-day was the first time she ever met this immaculate Mr. Hasty."

"Well, well," cried honest John Granger, "let's not quarrel. Sit up, Gabriel, and take a cup of tea with me. Let young Hasty drop for the present. It's not likely we shall see him again."

This ended the controversy for the time.

But in spite of his attempts to appear unconcerned, Gabriel Grout was ill at ease, and he withdrew from the cook's shanty at the first favorable opportunity.

Alone under the autumnal stars, the scaler communed with himself in a tone of wondering dissatisfaction.

"John Granger alive and well," he muttered. "Just Heaven! what can it mean? I am sure I did not miss my

mark, but John Granger comes home without a scratch. My soul! who is the man by the skidway, the man I shot?"

With something like a groan, Grout staggered across the intervening space separating the shanties.

He was not in a mood for seeking repose, however, and he paced the ground restlessly for a long hour under the drooping stars that studded the blue vault above.

"Somebody is dead in the woods," muttered the homicide. "Who is it—who?"

This was the burden of the scaler's thoughts, and a cold sweat oozed from his flesh and stood in clammy drops all over his person.

"Murder! murder! Yes, that is the fact, and what have I gained? Nothing. Viola hates me worse than ever, and I am no wise better off than before I fired that shot to-night. Ugh! how I wish this dread uncertainty was over. I am a veritable coward to tremble at shadows as I have to-night. I was a fool to drop any man without knowing to a certainty who I was aiming at."

With a shudder, Gabriel Grout entered the men's shanty and sought repose.

Long he tossed restlessly on his hard couch, and it was late ere he fell into a troubled slumber. Horrible dreams filled his brain, and he woke at length to find night vanished, and a heavy hand on his shoulder shaking him lustily. "Wake up! wake up! Gabriel Grout," shouted a voice in the scaler's ear.

"What—what's the matter?" gasped the scaler, starting up at length and rubbing his eyes.

"You sleep like a log," growled a hoarse voice. "An awful thing happened last night, Gabriel. One of the best men in the North Woods was murdered last night. Come and look at the body."

CHAPTER VI.

DOANE'S PRIVATE MARK.

GABRIEL GROUT sprang to his feet and clutched the speaker with both hands, clinging to him as a drowning man might to a floating plank.

"What has happened, Joe?" questioned the scaler in a husky voice.

"Murder," said the tall skidder.

"Murder! Who—when?"

"Come on, see for yourself, Gabe."

Just outside the men's shanty, on some planks laid across an old bob-sled, lay the form of the murdered man.

A group of startled skidders stood about in a semi-circle as Gabriel Grout and Joe Long came out into the gray of the early October morning. A white cloth had been laid over the face of the dead. This Joe Long removed, and then turned to Grout.

"Do you know 'im, Gabe?"

The scaler uttered a low cry and leaned heavily against the rough side of the shanty. His face was deadly white, and he seemed deeply agitated.

"It is Nicholas Doane."

"And a truer man never drew breath," said old John Granger. "He was the best friend I had in the North Woods. He and I went to the same school in our young days, and now to think it should turn out this way. Poor Nick!"

"How did it happen?" questioned Gabriel Grout, huskily.

"Look a-here."

Joe Long opened the front of the dead man's shirt and revealed a ragged wound near the left side.

"He has been shot," cried Grout. "A sad accident indeed."

"Accident!" cried Joe Long, with something like a hiss in his voice. "It was murder plain enough."

"Murder!" gasped Gabriel, huskily, his limbs trembling under him.

"It looks very much like it," said John Granger. "Poor Nick was found near one of the last skidways an hour ago by Joe and his partner. The body was cold,

showing that the mortal wound was given some hours ago, perhaps early last evening."

"But it must have been an accident," said Grout.

"Wait. When you know the facts you will know that it was no accident," pursued the logger. "Nick lay on his back beside the skidway, with a bullet-hole through his heart. Now, if poor Nick had come to his death by accident, surely the instrument of death would be found with the body."

"It would seem so."

"No rifle was found. Nick Doane was killed, either by accident or design on the part of another party."

Grout was regaining his composure now.

"I see through it," he cried, quickly. "You were expecting Doane up last week, Mr. Granger, with a package of money from Shields & Wells?"

"I was."

"Some scoundrel, knowing the man had money, dogged his steps, and murdered him in cold blood for the purpose of robbery."

"It would seem so."

"You have examined his pockets?"

"No."

"The first thing to do," said Grout, stepping to the side of the corpse, and going through the pockets in the coolest manner imaginable.

An old wallet containing a few papers of no value was all that was found on the dead man's person, aside from a pocket-knife and a few commonplace articles.

"Murder and robbery!" said Grout, as he retired from the examination.

"It's queer to me that old Nick didn't call at the shanty, instead o' going into the chopping," said Joe.

"That's easily accounted for," returned Grout. "Nick came up the creek looking for game. He's a great hunter, you know, and the vile assassin followed and shot him down almost in sight of our shanty."

"But where's Nick's gun?"

"The man who killed him took that too, I suppose."

"This must be looked into," said John Granger. "If murder has been committed, the assassin must not escape punishment."

"I am with you there," cried Gabriel Grout, with emphasis. "I say let Judge Lynch care for poor Nick's murderer when he is found."

"Aye, aye, that's the talk."

Not one of the crew went to his work that forenoon, and the logging camp presented an animated though hushed appearance.

The remains of Nick Doane were consigned to the care of two of the loggers, who were to convey them to the nearest station from whence they could be shipped home.

A murder for money was no common thing even in the North Woods, and great excitement pervaded the camp and held sway for many days.

Felix Wells, junior member of the firm of Shields & Wells, came to the woods a few days after the murder. Mr. George called him aside at once and questioned him regarding Nick Doane.

"No, I intrusted no money to Mr. Doane," said the lumberman. "The fact is, I thought the best plan would be to bring it myself."

"When was Doane in Ludington last?"

"About two weeks ago. He was talking then of going on a hunting excursion somewhere in this neighborhood. He said he expected to meet a friend here from further south."

"A friend! What was his name?"

"I think it was Jayne."

The brow of the old logger was contracted, a puzzled look coming over his face.

"You have asked me a good many questions regarding the hunter, Doane," said Mr. Wells; "now suppose you give me an insight into the meaning of so many questions."

"I will do so," said Granger. "No doubt you think me over curious, but I had a motive."

"Certainly," interrupted Wells, laughing.

"A foul crime has been committed, Mr. Wells. I supposed robbery was the object, but now I am not so sure."

"Explain yourself."

"Nick Doane was murdered a week ago to-day."

"Murdered!"

The lumber-dealer uttered the word in a manner indicating his startled feelings.

"Yes, murdered, Mr. Wells," and thereupon John Granger related the facts, so far as he was cognizant of them, connected with the death of Nicholas Doane.

"Well, I declare," exclaimed Wells, "this is terrible. Doane must have come up this way on that hunt he spoke to me about, and met his death this way. Poor Nick! He was as good a fellow as ever lived."

"That he was, and his cruel death must not go unavenged."

"Have you any suspicions regarding the guilty party?"

"None in the least."

"Are you, then, quite sure that he was murdered? Might not his death have been the result of an accident?"

"No; there was no gun with the body. The assassin took that much, at least."

"This may lead to the murderer's identification," said Wells.

"I don't know; there are a great many guns of the same pattern," said Granger.

"None exactly like old Nick Doane's, I'm thinking," asserted Wells. "I know the old rifle well. It was a muzzle-loader, the stock running the length of the barrel."

"True, there are few guns like that now, yet there may be two or more in Michigan answering your description."

"I haven't finished yet," said the lumberman. "There was one peculiarity about old Nick Doane's rifle that no one once seeing it could mistake. The stock had been cracked once upon a time, and Doane had mended it by riveting a piece of steel to the side, setting it into the wood."

"Exactly."

"On one end of this bit of steel are the letters X. O. X., rudely cut, though deeply, in the metal."

"What do the letters signify? Why did he not put his own name or initials on the stock?"

"The very question I once asked him," said Wells, "and he laughed significantly, tapping the stock with his long forefinger. 'I don't mean ter give myself away,' he said, with a laugh. 'Now, ef anyone shud steal this gun, and find Nick Doane's name onto it, they'd soon spile the looks on't. Not a man in Michigan but what ud know whose gun 'twas.' 'And return it quickly,' I said. He shook his head. 'Thet's my private mark, Felix, an' don't ye forgit it,' was the reply he gave. No one could fail to recognize the gun, John. You must keep your eye open for it."

"I certainly shall, and you must do the same."

"Trust me for that, John."

Mr. Wells left for Ludington on the following morning, and work in the woods continued much as it had done before the mysterious taking off of Nicholas Doane.

The loggers held nightly consultations over the death of Doane. The old man was loved by all who knew him, and a deep feeling pervaded the hearts of the rough skidders and choppers, a feeling of intense bitterness toward the man-slayer, whoever he might be.

Had the assassin ventured into that camp his chances for escaping alive would hardly be worth the noticing.

"There's no use talkin'," said Joe Long, striking the pine table with one bony fist, "the man that shot Nick Doane must be found."

"Exactly, Joe, but how'll you find the scamp? 'Tain't likely he's in these parts now."

"I think he is."

"What? Do you suspect——"

"Never mind now. Wait and see how the cat jumps, boys," returned the tall skidder.

With these words Joe went to his work.

One evening, an hour before dark, John Granger returned from an inspection of the chopping, and was about to enter the cook's shanty when his eye caught sight of a rifle leaning against the logs. Instinctively he reached out and seized the gun and glanced hurriedly at the stock.

It had been fractured once upon a time, and a piece of steel now held the parts in place, with the letters X. O. X. engraved in rude form on the smooth surface.

CHAPTER VII.

TOM ACCUSED OF MURDER.

THE old lumberman could scarcely repress a cry of triumph as the magical letters of old Nick Doane fell under his eye.

With a quick movement he opened the shanty door and strode across the threshold, expecting to confront the possessor of the rifle. He was disappointed at meeting his wife alone, who was busily engaged preparing the evening meal.

The logger turned on his heel and passed quickly outside, still holding the murdered man's rifle in his hand.

Without thinking as to his course, he walked away toward the spring, which flowed from the bank some feet above the creek, and about six rods from the house.

When he joined the bank overlooking the creek, he saw two forms standing under a clump of alders that shaded the spring.

He recognized his niece at a glance.

He soon confronted them, and then recognized Viola's companion, with a surprised start.

"Good evening, Mr. Granger," and the young hunter raised his cap with a polite bow.

"You here, Mr. Hasty?" cried the logger, in a tone of pained surprise.

"I am here, Mr. Granger," said Tom. "I met your niece just as she was coming for water. She had a bit of surprising news to tell, and so——"

"Surprising news?" the logger interrupted.

"Yes. The murder of Nick Doane."

"You knew him?"

"No. My chum, Dell, was an old friend of Mr. Doane's, however. I have heard him speak of the hunter many times. He will be deeply shocked when he learns of his old friend's death."

"No doubt of it," said Granger, who was not a little excited as he brought the long rifle to the front.

"Do you know this, Mr. Hasty?"

"It is mine. I left it leaning against the shanty as I came away."

"Where did you get it?"

The old logger leaned eagerly forward and transfixed Tom Hasty with his eyes.

"Do you desire the rifle, Mr. Granger?"

"Where did you get it?" again questioned the logger, in a fierce undertone.

"I found it."

"Exactly."

The logger straightened up and thrust one long finger almost in the face of the young hunter.

"*Tom Hasty, I accuse you of the murder of Nicholas Doane!*"

Viola uttered a cry of horror and shrank away from the young hunter as though she believed his touch contagion.

Tom was cool as an icicle.

"You're crazy now, old man," he said. "Why should I kill anybody? Good thunder! it cuts my heart to shoot a deer, let alone a human creature. No, Mr. Granger, you've missed your mark this time by a long ways."

The young hunter's coolness took the trapper aback. He had expected him to start and turn pale, to tremble with alarm, but the youth refused to show the least sign of guilt.

"But this rifle?"

"What about the rifle?"

"It was Nicholas Doane's property, of which he was robbed on the night of the murder, a week ago."

"Is it possible?" cried Tom. "I said a moment ago that the rifle was mine, and that was true in one sense. I found it to-day in the woods about forty rods from one of your skidways. Leaving my own gun, I brought this one in. I saw rust on the barrel, and judged some one had forgotten where he left it, so I brought it to the shanty, thinking one of the men might be the owner."

"A very plausible story," said Granger.

"Do you think I am not telling the truth, sir?"

"I will not say that," returned the logger, "but I am not the only one interested. Law and justice demands a full investigation. This gun was owned by the man who was murdered a few days since, and it is a most important link in the chain of evidence against some one."

"It looks that way," admitted Tom. No one can be more anxious than I am for justice to overtake the miserable wretch who shot Nick Doane. I had intended returning to camp to-night, but——"

"You will not go?"

"Not if you wish me to remain."

"It is my duty to see that this affair is investigated," said the old logger. "You will oblige me by accompanying me to the shanty."

"I will come soon, Mr. Granger."

"Well, I can wait."

"No need of that, sir. I will meet you in the shanty as soon as the boys come from their work."

But the logger did not move away as the young hunter wished. He dropped the breech of the old rifle to the ground and looked fixedly into Tom's face.

Viola stood in an attitude of irresolution, regarding both men.

"Viola, why are you here?"

John Granger put this question in a harsher tone than was usual with him; the girl seemed surprised and pained at his abrupt harshness of manner.

"I came to the spring after water, Uncle John."

"Yes? Where is your pail?"

Viola blushed rosy red and looked down at her feet.

"I know all about it," said her uncle, severely. "You encountered this man, Hasty, on your first visit to the spring, and you foolishly granted him an interview. This is dangerous, Viola. Mr. Hasty is an entire stranger to all of us, and may be a heartless criminal. I am surprised at your want of self-respect, my girl. You may go to the house now, and perhaps soon be ready to thank your stars that this little romance, begun a week or ten days ago has terminated so happily for yourself."

The girl looked first at her uncle, then at Tom.

She saw the little cloud that was gathering, but at that moment was unable to comprehend its terrible import.

"Are you going to obey me?" said John Granger, sternly.

Viola turned from the side of Tom, and walked away without a word.

"She has obeyed you," said Tom. "Now, if you will be kind enough to explain your position I shall be everlastingly obliged to you."

"I assume that you are the murderer of Nicholas Doane," said the logger, coldly, "and I propose to have the facts investigated."

"Your presumption is unfounded, Mr. Granger," returned Tom, his lip curling a little scornfully. "You are the first man who ever dared impute crime to a Hasty. On account of your age I overlook the insult."

The old logger's face flushed perceptibly at this cutting remark.

"I never met you until a week ago, young man," said Granger. "At that time I was favorably impressed, but to-day, I am sorry to say, my feelings have undergone a

change. You may consider yourself my prisoner, young man."

"I shall do no such thing."

"What! Dare you attempt escape?"

"From what—from whom, pray?" swinging his arms about in the air. "I am free, and my own master, not your prisoner, by any means."

The old man threw the old rifle to his shoulder, the muzzle pointed toward Tom.

"You see, I have you foul, young man."

Tom uttered a contemptuous laugh.

"Do you think I fear that old rusty firearm. Bah! But I am ready to confront any accusers you may bring forward."

"Then come with me to the shanty."

"With pleasure, sir. I was willing to go all the time, only I don't care to be driven against my will."

Tom walked forward, and the two soon stood on the bank above the spring just as a man approached from the woods.

"Hello!" ejaculated Tom; "here's my friend with the snake's eyes and crooked tongue."

It was Gabriel Grout who approached, and the words of Tom Hasty fell on his ear, rousing his angry passions suddenly.

"You miserable young scamp, I'll get even with you yet," hissed Gabriel.

"You want me to thump you again?"

"There, no quarreling," cried John Granger. "We have a matter of more serious moment on hand for the evening, which unprejudiced minds must be brought to bear upon."

"What is that?" from Grout.

"It's about Nick Doane," Tom put in. "Why did you shoot him, Gabriel? For money or——"

"Inferno!" hissed the scaler, trembling with rage, and an inward fear. "What do you mean!"

"Didn't you kill old Nick?"

"No, no, what put that into your head?" gasped Grout.

"His fertile fancy, since he is himself accused," said Granger.

Of a sudden the scaler seemed to take in the situation.

A low exclamation fell from his lips.

"You have found the murderer, then?" he said, in a whisper, bending toward his employer.

"I think so," was the answer, in an equally low tone.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN ANGRY DISCUSSION.

JOHN GRANGER resolved to keep a close watch over Tom, whom he considered his prisoner until a higher tribunal should dispose of his case.

The men were crossing from their shanty for supper as the three came into view.

"You will sup with me to-night, Mr. Hasty," said the logger.

"Nothing would please me better," returned the young hunter.

Nothing was said during the meal about the suspicions of the logger, nor the circumstance of finding the murdered man's rifle. Granger left this for the proper time.

Shortly after dark, while a score of men were gathered in the sleeping shanty, Tom Hasty and John Granger entered.

After a little preliminary talk, the old logger spoke of the late murder, at the same time exhibiting the rifle Tom had brought with him that day.

The gun was recognized by at least six men present as being the one once owned by Nick Doane.

"Where did you get this gun?" questioned Joe Long.

"This man brought it here to-day," laying his hand on Tom Hasty's shoulder as he spoke. "He has remained here to-night that the matter might be examined into."

All eyes were fixed on the young hunter.

"Yes, Mr. Granger thought I'd better stay and talk the

matter up a little," said the youth, coolly. "I am willing to leave the gun here, since it does not belong to me, and may lead to some clew regarding the murderer."

"It has led to, or, rather, it is a strong clew in itself, I should say," put in Gabriel Grout, who, as a matter of course, was on hand, and anxious to further his own interests at the expense of another.

"What is your theory?"

"That this young hunter murdered our friend Doane."

Again Tom was the target for a score of eyes. He was a stranger to all, and the fact of his having the murdered man's rifle in his possession was strong evidence against him.

"Your name is Hasty?" questioned Joe Long.

"That is my name, sir."

"How did you come by this rifle?"

"Found it in the woods."

"A pretty story," sneered Gabriel Grout.

"Where?"

"Near one of your skidways not far from the bank of the creek."

"All bosh," sneered Grout.

"Young man, did ye know whose gun you'd got holt on when you found this?"

"I did not. Never saw Nick Doane in the world, though I have heard of him through a chum of mine, Dell Jayne by name."

"Dell Jayne?" cried Long.

"Yes, sir."

"Where is he? I know a Dell Jayne."

"I left him at the camp, five miles from here. I suppose he is there now. He won't bother his head about me to-night."

"What's the use of this questioning?" growled Gabriel Grout. "This man is guilty, and it behooves us to see that he is punished."

"Who asked you to speak?" growled Joe Long, turning toward the scaler. "I have my doubts about this youngster's guilt. I have."

"Have you?" sneered Grout. "Well, your opinion ain't worth more than any other man's. I think most of the boys look upon this adventurer as the man who murdered Nick Doane, and I demand that he be punished for his infamous crime."

"Don't go too fast," cried John Granger. "I think circumstances are strongly against this young man, but this is not the proper tribunal to decide the case."

"Where then?" demanded Grout.

"In a court of justice of course."

"Boys, how is it?" cried Gabriel Grout, turning toward the circle of rough faces gathered about the accused. "Shall we allow the murderer of Nick Doane to go free?"

"Never—never!"

Deep and stern came the answer to the scaler's question.

"See here," cried Joe Long, "ain't you rushing things a little too fast, Mr. Grout, I——"

"It don't matter what you may think," snapped the scaler. "We don't mean that this infernal murderer shall escape his just deserts."

At this Tom Hasty's cheeks burned hotly.

Turning upon the scaler, he said:

"You keep on and I'll give you another thumping. When you speak as you did just now you utter an infamous lie, and——"

"None o' this," growled a burly chopper, pushing his way forward and confronting Tom. "You've been caught with Nick Doane's rifle in your hands. You can't tell how you got it?"

"But I do tell how I got it."

"You *try* to," sneered the man, "but that's too thin, my young rooster. We fellers know how ter finish sich dogs as you, don't we, boys?"

"Aye, aye! that we do."

"Well, I declare, this is becoming interesting," cried Tom. "I never for one moment supposed any man in his

sober senses would think of accusing me of murder. I think it is a put-up job on the part of the man who tried to kill me something over a week ago."

"Stop his clack, boys. Are we to stand here and listen to this murderous insulter!" cried Grout, hotly.

"No, no, we won't stand it," and a movement was made toward Tom as if to seize upon him, but Joe Long and Mr. Granger interfered.

"There must be no violence here," said the logger. "The young man may be a murderer, but of this we are not sure. I will see that he is detained until an officer can be summoned from Ludington or some other place."

"A nice plan!" growled the big man who had allied himself to Gabriel Grout. "No murderers get punished nowadays. If we let this chap go it's the last we'll see of him, now mind what I tell you."

Tom stood with folded arms facing the angry crowd.

A smile swept his face as he noted the contention going on in the ranks of the sturdy loggers.

"There's no use quarreling," said Tom. "I am not afraid to look justice in the face. If you deem circumstances sufficiently strong against me, why, you can bind me over to court."

"Bind you over. Well, that's good," answered Grout.

"I wasn't talking to you," cried Tom, fixing his eyes on the scaler. "You are a slimy snake who would strike a man in the back and then dart back into your hole. You hate me because my friend Dell Jayne beat you shooting at a mark, and soon after that you attempted my life in a cowardly manner. I know nothing of the murder of this Nick Doane, but if the truth was known I've not a doubt Gabriel Grout could tell pretty near who fired the murderous bullet."

There was a lofty scorn in the speaker's voice when he referred to the scaler, and under it Gabriel Grout writhed and hissed like an impaled serpent.

"Mighty well spoken for a man in your position," growled Grout's big supporter, whose name was Hod Posy, and one of the most muscular men in Granger's crew, as well as one of the most evil-minded.

"Shall we stand here to be insulted by a red-handed assassin?" cried Gabriel Grout.

"The less said soonest mended," said Joe Long.

"Give us the young scamp. We'll soon make him confess," growled Posy, advancing and reaching out his long arm.

"No you don't, old man," cried Long. "Fair play's a jewel, and that we'll have here, an' don't you forget it neither."

The situation was not a pleasant one. Tom realized that the least spark might provoke a giant flame.

"I am sorry I have been the cause of so much trouble," he said. "In order to have you all satisfied, I will agree to remain here until you send for Dell Jayne, who can testify to my good character, and if you like, any one who is a lawful person to administer an oath. I am willing to appear in court, if necessary, but I have no relish for mob-law, such as a few spirits have exhibited to-night."

"We'd best hang him an' save all trouble," growled Posy, who seemed as anxious as his friend Grout, for the removal of the scaler's rival.

"A nice thing that would be," sneered Joe Long, who from the first had befriended young Tom Hasty. "The boy says he will stay here until we can send for his friend Dell Jayne. That's good enough. I know Dell, and he's one o' the best young chaps that ever drew the breath o' life. I move that we turn Mr. Hasty over to a committee who shall be responsible for his safety till such time as we can find out the truth."

"That's fair enough," said Tom.

"Well, I don't know as we can object to that," said Posy, glancing over at Gabriel Grout.

"Certainly not," said the scaler. "I move that Hod Posy, Bill Brace and Jim Twist act as such committee."

"Second the motion."

"Well, boys, if that be your minds, make it manifest."

"Aye, aye!" rang from the throats of all.

Joe Long turned to Tom.

"I expect we may's well submit, Tom. I like you, and will see fa'r play. "You can stay here or in t'other shanty, whichever you like."

"We will fix the place for him to stay," growled Posy. "I reckon I've got some'at to say now on the subject."

"Well, he must stay in one of the shanties," said Joe.

"Not necessarily," growled Posy. "I guess I know of a safer place. Come, lads, let's take our prisoner out o' this."

The three men advanced toward Tom, but the latter put out his hand quickly.

"Not with you. At any rate, I must know where you are going."

"That's none o' your business," growled Posy. "We are your keepers now, my fine young rooster!"

CHAPTER IX.

WITHIN THE NOOSE.

THE eyes of Tom Hasty flashed fire.

"You are not my keepers," he said, drawing back quickly. "I will go nowhere with you, unless Mr. Granger says so. If I place myself in the hands of his men, I shall look to him for protection."

"You shall be protected," said the logger. "It is the business of this committee to see that you do not leave camp for the next few hours, further than that they cannot go."

"How can we prevent his leaving camp if we don't lock him up?" growled Posy. "For my part I'm not going to leave an open hole for this murderer to escape if I know myself."

After considerable discussion, it was agreed that Tom should occupy a room used as a wood-house, joining the cook's shanty. This room contained only a small amount of wood.

It was twelve feet square, with no windows, the only opening being a narrow door near the corner next the cook house.

"Just the place," said Grout, to his friend Posy aside. "If he attempts to escape, you can drop him. Understand?"

"I do, Gabriel."

"Good; this thing is turning out better than I dared to hope. Of course there can be no doubt of the young scamp's guilt."

"Of course not."

Joe Long and Mr. Granger accompanied the guard to the wood-house, and saw the prisoner safely ensconced therein.

"Not a very comfortable place, Mr. Granger," said Long.

"No. I am sorry this has become necessary, but justice demands that we take every precaution. I hope the young man is innocent. I will bring out some blankets and see that Mr. Hasty has a comfortable place to sleep."

When the old logger entered the shanty after blankets he was met by his niece with many questions.

"We shall take ample precautions to see that he does not escape," said Granger. "We have put him in the wood-house."

"What! put Tom Hasty in that cold out-house?" cried Viola, the indignant blood mantling her cheeks.

"Well, that's the only place we could agree upon."

"He must feel the insult keenly."

"Bother!" ejaculated the old man. "This Tom Hasty is accused of murder, and he ought to feel thankful that his life is spared, let alone a little inconvenience."

"But Tom Hasty is a gentleman. Surely you do not believe him guilty of crime; do you, Uncle John?"

"He looks more like a thief than an honest man, anyhow," put in Mrs. Granger, spitefully. "I haven't the least doubt of his being a murderer."

But the old logger refused to talk further on the subject then.

Procuring a pair of blankets, he returned to the wood-house.

"Fit for a king to sleep on," said Tom, as he arranged the blankets in one corner of the room. "I suppose you will send for my chum early in the morning, Mr. Granger. I don't care to stop here longer than necessary."

"I shall make all haste in the matter," returned the logger, as he walked away, accompanied by Joe Long.

The door of the prison was a narrow board affair, not very strong, secured when shut by a small wooden pin.

"He could get out of there easy enough," said Jim Twist, "if 'twasn't for the guard."

"Of course," said Gabriel Grout; "but with three men on the watch there is no chance for him."

"For my part," said Brace, "I can't see the use of three men settin' up all night to watch. One man's enough, with a good gun."

"True as preachin'!" returned Hod Posy.

The door was now closed and fastened upon the prisoner, and the guard stood leaning against the outer wall.

"This way a moment, Hod."

Gabriel Grout plucked Posy by the sleeve, and that worthy quickly followed the scaler aside. Seating themselves on a log, the two men sat silent, as if listening, for some moments.

"There's nobody around," said Posy. "If you've got anything to say, spit 'er out, Gabe."

"Well, I haven't much to say," returned the scaler, in a low tone. "Of one thing you may rest assured: Tom Hasty is a dangerous character."

"Dangerous to you, eh?" And the big chopper laughed, under his breath.

"You may have it so, if you wish."

"I knowed it," grunted Posy. "You are sweet on the gal, I've noticed that all along; but this 'ere young rooster hez got the inside track. Ain't that so?"

"Very near the truth."

"And you want this Tom Hasty squelched—that is, put out the way. Right agin, ain't I?"

"See here, Mr. Posy, you don't seem to take in the situa ion exactly," said Gabriel Grout. "Now I don't wish to be mis'nderstood. First, there's no doubt in my mind—nor in yours, I take it—of the guilt of Tom Hasty."

"None, boss."

"He murdered old Nick Doane in cold blood."

"Exactly so, boss."

"This being true, Tom Hasty has forfeited his life to the State."

"True again."

"Well, it will never do for this Dell Jayne to come 'round, neither will it do to have Hasty indicted in the courts."

"Couldn't be convicted you think?"

"I fear not; and then the murderer would escape. I think Judge Lynch ought to settle this case."

"So do I."

"And to-night."

"Give me yer hand, Gabe. You express my sentiments exactly."

"Well, then, the way is clear for the consummation of the good work," returned Gabriel Grout.

"Yes; but me must settle on petic'lars," said Posy. "I hain't no grudge agin' this hunter, but I know'd Nick Doane, an' his murderer ought ter hang."

"Exactly. I'm glad to see you manifest such a spirit of justice, Mr. Posy. Now to particulars."

"Yes, let's hev the petic'lars."

"A plain case of lynching might answer our turn the best perhaps," said the wily scaler, "although we would take more chances in that way."

"Be there enough men to do the job; men of nerve, I mean, Gabe?"

"I think so. The most of the boys believe Hasty guilty, and would gladly see him hung. I think we might count on six who would be willing to have a hand in the work."

"That includes Jim and Bill?"

"Yes," returned Grout. "At midnight, when all is quiet, a few men might enter the room, seize the prisoner, and either hang him right there, or take him to a tree outside. Ten minutes would finish the job."

"Slick as a clam," ejaculated Posy.

"Then there's another way."

"Let's have it."

"You might break the door open and shoot the prisoner, and then represent to the boys that the villain attempted to escape, and in the struggle he met his death."

For half a minute the burly chopper made no reply to this startling proposition. Finally, however, he brought his open hand down with decided emphasis upon the knee of his companion.

"No, no, Gabe, I couldn't do that; 'twould be murder."

The crafty scaler saw that he had overshot the mark for once, and hastened to make himself solid with his tool.

"Only one way of disposing of a vicious outlaw, Hod," he said; "yet, at the same time, it doesn't look hardly right either. Upon the whole, I think my first suggestion the best."

"So do I."

"Then that shall be carried out."

"You will go in with us, Gabe?"

"It's not necessary," returned the scaler. "I think it best that I remain outside of the trouble altogether. You see—"

"I see," the chopper interrupted. "If there should be an afterclap, you want to be on the safe side. Your boldness is like a sheep's after all, Gabe. But then I don't care. I s'pose if I let you off you won't mind givin' me a few dollars fur helpin' dispose of a rival?"

"My'gracious, Hod, would that be right?"

"Mebbe not. You are too virtuous, Gabe. Guess we'll let the law take its course arter all."

The chopper rose to his feet, but Gabriel Grout drew him down again very suddenly.

"See here, Hod, how much do you want?"

"I won't squeal ef you'll give me a hundred dollars."

"I'll do it."

"The court o' Jedge Lynch will settle Mr. Hasty's case 'fore sunrise, an' don't you forgit it."

The two men then separated. Hod Posy going back to his comrades while Gabriel Grout walked to the men's shanty.

The scaler found several men talking over the events of the evening, standing in front of the shanty.

"He's guilty's pison an' don't you forgit it."

"Of course he is. We'd ought to string him up to a tree, the infernal scamp. If it hadn't been for Joe we'd have fixed the murderer of poor Nick."

Such were the words that greeted the ear of the scaler as he approached, and a smile of satisfaction swept his dark face as he thought that one obstacle to the success of his plans was soon to be swept effectually away.

In the meantime Tom Hasty had thrown himself upon his hard couch of blankets, and was soon lost in happy dreamland.

How long he had slumbered he knew not.

A touch on his shoulder roused him from his slumbers, and a voice whispered in his ear the one word:

"Come."

Dark forms stood about the room as the young hunter rose to his feet, and several hands were laid on his arms.

"Where?" he questioned. "What do you want?"

"You to go with us," said a low voice.

Almost on the instant a noose fell over the young hunter's neck and he felt the rope tighten, as he was pushed toward the open doorway.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

"CONFOUND it. I'd like to know what keeps Tom so late," muttered Dell Jayne, as he sat down in company with Indian Pete, to a supper of stewed venison and boiled potatoes, the latter brought in from the station by Pete that very afternoon.

"On track of muckwah, mebbe," said the half-breed.

"I don't think it," returned Jayne. "We've killed six bears and a dozen deer during the past week, and he promised to go to the station with you to-morrow, Pete, and stock up our ammunition. You see we've used piles of cartridges."

"Me think so too," grunted the half-breed.

It was dark outside now, and innumerable stars dotted the blue firmament above. Dell had prepared supper soon after the Indian arrived. On the morrow he was intending to send over several carcasses of venison with Tom and Pete, but as Tom failed to appear, he began to think the morrow's excursion might fail to come off.

Dell stirred the fire, and then walked to the entrance of the tent, and peered out into the icy air of the October night.

"By thunder! Pete, I don't like this."

"What's that?"

"Tom's playing off this way. I'm thinking he's gone over to the logging camp again. He said something about a pretty girl he saw there once, over a week ago. It would be just like him to run back there after a pretty face. Tom is a fool in such matters."

"Most men are," was the comment of Indian Pete. "Mebbe, too, he's heard of Nick Doane's murder, and—"

"Well, look a-here," cried Dell, suddenly turning upon his Indian friend. "What do you mean by speaking thus of Nick Doane?"

"Mebbe you haven't heard."

"I have heard nothing about Nick since I come to the woods."

"Then it'll be news to you ter learn that poor old Nick's gone under."

"No joking now, Pete."

"I ain't joking, Master Dell. Nick wor killed more'n a week ago, down nigh ole man Granger's lumber camp."

"This is terrible," cried the young hunter. "I should have heard of this sooner. Poor Nick. How did it happen, Pete?"

"'Twas murder they say."

For a time young Dell Jayne was quite overcome by this news. Nick Doane had been in the employ of the elder Jayne long years before, and his genial nature and kindness of heart had endeared him to the boy.

From that time forward, whenever Doane came to the Jayne homestead he was a most welcome visitor. It had been some months, almost a year since Dell had met the old hunter, and now the chance of meeting in this world was gone forever.

Pete then related the circumstances attending the mysterious taking off of Nick Doane as he had heard them from a man who came up to the station from the lumber camp.

"My soul!" ejaculated Dell, "this must be looked into. I didn't know that Nick Doane had an enemy in the world. I can hardly realize that this horrible recital is true, Pete."

"I don't think there's any mistake about it," said the half breed.

The minutes waxed into hours, with no Tom Hasty.

For a time Dell had forgotten his young friend in his excitement over the news of old Nick Doane's death, but after a time he realized that Tom was staying away beyond all account.

"What can detain Tom?" he finally queried, looking at his watch.

"Past nine. Pete, there's something wrong here," and Dell sprang to his feet and went once more to the opening in the tent.

"Don't know; mebbe so."

"I know there is," cried Dell, remembering what Tom had told him about his meeting Gabriel Grout at the lumber camp. "There's mischief afoot as sure's you're born."

"Mebbe so," again grunted Indian Pete.

"You know the way to the lumber camp, Pete?"

"Yes."

"How far from here?"

"Four mile, mebbe little more."

"Will you go with me to-night?"

"What for?"

"I am going to look for Tom."

The half-breed lay stretched on his blanket in front of the fire, and seemed loath to leave his comfortable position for the chill of the outside air.

"Guess Tom all right," said the half-breed, yawning. "Him smart boy. No catch him 'sleep."

"True," returned Dell, "but I don't lie down without knowing something of Tom's whereabouts. This murder has made me nervous. No, I couldn't sleep a wink to-night, so I may as well take a little tramp through the woods as not. If you prefer to remain here, all right."

At this the half-breed sprang suddenly to his feet.

"Me go, too," he said, tightening his belt, and seizing his rifle.

"I knew you wouldn't go back on me," said Dell. "Think you can find the camp in the night, Pete?"

"Dis creek go past camp?"

"It does."

"Yes. We follow that if you say. Me can go straight if you not 'fraid to trust."

"You are used to these woods," returned Dell, "and ought to know how to find Granger's camp, even in the night. I will follow you, and we will go straight, and thus save time, which would be lost following the tortuous course of the creek."

After looking to the horse which was hitched to a tree near the tent, Dell signified his readiness to proceed.

The two men set out at once, Indian Pete in advance. They crossed the creek some rods below camp and pushed their way as rapidly as the undergrowth would permit, into the forest.

Half an hour passed in this manner, when the two men came to a sudden halt. A fierce growl fell on the ears of both.

Indian Pete's rifle went to his shoulder in the twinkling of an eye.

The report of the half-breed's rifle woke the echoes of the forest. Then came a fierce howl of rage and pain, and a huge black bear rushed forward, with open jaws, upon the two hunters.

Indian Pete fell back—his rifle was only one shot—and gave place to Dell, whose Winchester proved too much for bruin, and after the third shot he went down in the agonies of death.

"We won't stop to take off the hide," said Dell, as the half-breed whipped out his knife. "We have a more important duty to perform to-night."

"Mebbe so."

Indian Pete sheathed his knife, and then quickly reloaded his long rifle, and, after a delay of twenty minutes, the twain were once more moving through the woods in the direction of John Granger's lumber camp.

The night seemed to grow lighter as they advanced. The forest was becoming more open, and soon their feet struck a logging-road.

"We are most there now?" said Dell.

"Most there," grunted the half-breed.

Suddenly huge piles of logs met the vision of the two forest wanderers. They had come to the skidways in close proximity to the shanties.

"If Tom is not here," mused Dell, "I shall feel vexed at my coming."

"Hush!" exclaimed Indian Pete, suddenly laying his hand on his companion's arm.

Both men halted and listened intently.

The sound of feet on the frozen ground reached their ears plainly.

"Some one is coming this way," cried Dell excitedly.

"Hist!"

Soon several dark forms were visible not many rods away. They had halted under a low-branched tree.

"Thar's no use talkin'," growled a heavy voice from the group; "you've got to swing, my hearty. This ere's Jedge Lynch's court, an' we are goin' ter execute the law agin' the dirty scamp as murdered poor ole Nick Doane."

What was the meaning of all this? Who was the prisoner about to be summarily dealt with? These questions flashed through the brain of Dell Jayne with lightning rapidity.

"There's no use parleying. Hoist him up, boys."

"Hold on here," cried a clear, ringing voice that fairly made Dell start. "If you hang me you will be guilty of murder. I am innocent of the crime."

"Shut off his wind, boys."

"Cowards!" retorted Tom Hasty. "This is a put-up job, and Gabriel Grout is at the bottom of the whole infamous proceedings."

At this moment the rope tightened around the speaker's neck, but he was not pulled up just then.

"Hold, in the name of justice!"

A loud voice rang in the ears of the gathered loggers, and paralyzed their movements for the moment.

"My God, Dell, is that you?" gasped the nearly-strangled prisoner.

"It is me, Tom, old fellow," cried Dell Jayne, as he pushed his way to the front, closely followed by Indian Pete. "What in nature is the meaning of this?"

Before Tom could utter a word, Hod Posy confronted the newcomers, thrusting his huge fist against Dell's breast.

"No interferin' here," he growled. "We mean business, we do, an' ef you don't want to git hurt you'll stand from under. This young scamp's a murderer—"

"That's an infernal lie!" cried Dell, completely beside himself with indignant wrath. "This man you have here is my chum, Tom Hasty, and you must release him at once, or some of you will need a coroner to sit on your carcasses in the morning."

CHAPTER XI.

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT.

THE words of the young hunter rang out stern and clear on the evening air. The star-light was sufficient to reveal forms pretty plain-

ly, although features were not to be studied advantageously in the darkness.

The sturdy loggers of the North Woods are not easily "bluffed," and on this occasion they at once resented the threat flung in their faces by Tom Hasty's rash young friend.

"We shall proceed with the execution, youngster," said Hod Posy, grimly, "an' ef you interfere the coroner will hev carcasses ter sit on fur a fact. Go on with the show, lads."

At this instant Dell Jayne thrust his rifle forward and drew the hammer, the muzzle peering unexpectedly into the face of the master of ceremonies.

"Stop! Release my friend or I'll bore you through."

"Thunderation!" ejaculated Posy, recoiling from the dangerous weapon with an oath. "Jist snatch onto this young cub, some o' you boys. We don't want the hull camp roused by his noise."

Several men advanced toward Dell, but now he was joined by the tall half-breed, who had brought his long rifle on a level with Dell's, thus presenting a formidable front to the enemy.

The loggers were armed only with clubs, excepting Posy and his two friends, Jim Twist and Bill Brace, who each carried an old rifle, neither having been used in over a month, and therefore hardly to be relied on in an emergency.

"This ere pup has murdered a man," said Hod Posy in a conciliatory tone, "and we are going ter string him up fur it."

"The man lies," cried Tom Hasty.

"I know that," put in Dell Jayne. "You have been accused of murdering my friend Nick Doane."

"And we've got evidence that proves he did it," asserted Posy.

"Tom is not guilty," asserted Dell, "but I will hear the evidence."

"As if you was jedge," sneered Hod Posy. "We hev tried the young scamp and found him guilty; 'we don't ask ony of your interference. Boys, don't mind these fellows. We know the man is guilty, and we will string him up."

"We will listen to the evidence," said Dell, coolly, ignoring Posy for the time.

Tom briefly related how he came to be in his present predicament.

"You will find my Winchester under a log, near the skidway, where I found Nick Doane's rifle," finished Tom. "Not one of these wretches have looked there for it, or if they have it has not counted in my favor."

"This thing's gone far enough," growled Posy. "We know what our duty is. Up with him, boys! I will tend ter this young blowhard here."

"Hello! what does this mean?"

A sudden commotion was manifested as several new-comers appeared upon the scene.

"Lynch law, by thunder!" ejaculated the well-known voice of Joe Long, as he pushed his way into the crowd. "Ha! Tom, they haven't murdered you yet, I see."

"No: but I've had a pretty close call."

"I mistrusted this," returned Joe, "and meant to keep my eyes open. I fell asleep, however, and came near being too late. This is the work of that sneaking Gabe Grout, I'll bet a farm."

There were two men with Joe, which, added to Dell and the half-breed, made the two parties about even.

Hod Posy began to swear in a terrible manner. He saw that a hundred dollars had slipped through his fingers, and he was very mad in consequence.

"There's no use your swearing, Hod Posy," said Joe, as he drew the almost fatal noose from Tom's neck. "It won't do you a durn'd bit of good. This young man shall go free. I'll risk but what he'll ans'er when called for."

There was considerable growling among the partisans of Posy, but even they were glad of an excuse to get free from a most disagreeable scrape.

Tom was with his friends now.

The lynchers dispersed suddenly, leaving our friends masters of the situation.

Tom wrung Joe Long by the hand, then introduced him to Indian Pete.

"You have befriended me all along, Joe," cried Tom, "and you shall not live to regret it. I can prove my innocence by hunting down the real criminal, which I mean to do before I seek other game."

"That's you, my boy," exclaimed the tall logger. "I reckon you won't hev ter look far for the real murderer, nother!"

"You have suspicions then?" cried Dell, eagerly.

"I should say so," grunted Long. "But I won't whisper 'em here. Tom knows who I mean."

"I think so," said Tom.

"My friend may return with me I suppose," said Dell, who wished to show deference to the generous logger's wishes.

"He's free's air far's I'm concerned," returned Joe.

"Yes, he'd better go," said one of Joe's companions. "'Twouldn't be safe for him here after what has happened."

"I'm no coward," asserted Tom, "but I think likely I can do the cause of justice a favor by leaving this vicinity for to-night at least."

"That's my opinion," from Joe Long.

"And mine, too," said Dell Jayne.

After a little further talk the parties separated, Joe and his friends going back to the shanty, while Dell, Tom and the half-breed set out on their return to camp.

"It's mighty lucky I happened to feel uneasy, and turned my steps

this way, Tom. Those men would have unjointed your neck sure, and in another minute too, if Pete an' I hadn't come up as we did."

Tom admitted the truth of his friend's argument.

"And you got yourself into this scrape all on account of a chit of a girl, Thomas Hasty. What do you think of yourself anyway?"

"No nonsense, Dell," cried the prisoner, "I am grateful for your late assistance, but I cannot allow you to criticise my taste——"

"Oh, ho! so it's gone so far as that, eh," cried Dell. "Well, there's no telling what a chap won't do when he's in love. Run his head into a noose or break his neck in some other way, and then find himself jilted in the end. That's the way it always ends, Tom."

"Not always, Dell, though that may be your experience," returned Tom.

After going some distance Tom came to a sudden halt.

"There now," he cried, "what fools?"

"What's up now, Tom?"

"My rifle. I must go back after it."

"It's a mile nearly," said Dell; "We ought to have thought of it sooner. Never mind it to-night. You can return for it in the morning."

"No, I must have it to-night. Old Gabriel may get his clutches onto it, then good-bye Winchester. You can wait here until I return. I won't be gone long."

"Can you find it in the night?"

"Of course I can. I know exactly where I put it."

"Well, you want to look sharp or you may get into trouble, Tom. Some of those loggers wouldn't like any better fun than to get their hands onto you once more."

"I'm aware of that. I shall be careful, so don't you worry."

"I will accompany you."

"No need of that, Dell. There's not the slightest danger, as I shan't go near the shanties."

"Well, if you must go——"

"I must."

Tom was off like a flash. With long strides he soon compassed the distance, and stood once more near the spot where he had found the rifle of the murdered man.

There lay the log under which he had secreted his own goodly weapon. Stooping, he thrust his hand under the log. All along the log he felt, then he started to his feet with a cry of disappointment.

The rifle was gone.

"Tom Hasty, your hour has come—die!"

CHAPTER XII.

A MAIDEN'S RUSE—CONCLUSION.

Fierce with venomous anger were the words hissed in the face of the young hunter. A tall form had risen before him, one long arm reaching forth to grasp him by the throat, but Tom sprang backward in time to avoid the clutch and the savage stroke of the murderous knife.

Then it was that Tom closed with the would-be assassin before he had time to raise his knife for a second stroke.

Back and forth they reeled over the frozen ground.

Tom's lusty frame was stronger than the other, and he soon succeeded in crushing his unknown antagonist to the earth.

"My God, you have killed me!"

Tom sprang from the prostrate form in amazement.

"You are Gabriel Grout!" exclaimed the youth in astonishment.

"Yes, and you have done for me."

"I have not harmed you," returned Tom. "You attempted to murder me, and in self-defense I hurled you to the ground."

The fallen man was gasping for breath then, and Tom Hasty became alarmed. Bending over the fallen man he discovered that the villain's knife had, by some means, become turned against himself, and in falling the blade had penetrated his side.

"Oh—oh!" gasped Grout, "I—I'm going to die."

And Tom felt so too.

To be found by the loggers over the dead body of Grout would insure him a short shrift Tom knew.

Leaping upon the skidway near, he shouted for help at the top of his voice.

The loud shouts of the young hunter were heard, and in the course of twenty minutes several of the shantymen arrived on the scene, one of them bearing a lantern.

"Murder!" gasped the fallen man, the moment his comrades came up.

"What in creation does this mean?" cried Hod Posy, who pushed himself to the front.

"That yonder hunter has killed me," cried Grout, pointing toward Tom, who stood dumb with wonder near at hand.

"Seize him, boys, we'll make short work of the cowardly murderer this time."

But Tom Hasty waved the men off.

"I am not guilty, I came here to find my rifle and Gabriel Grout assaulted me. He meant to murder me, but I gained the upper hand and hurled him to the ground. In falling he inflicted this wound on himself."

"It's a lie!" groaned the wounded man.

This was enough. Tom was seized, and his hands bound with a cord one of the loggers happened to have on his person.

Tom might have escaped, but he did not make the attempt. Dazed and wondering, he allowed himself to be led away, once more at the mercy of the men who all along had been thirsting for his blood.

The wounded man was taken in charge by another party, and taken to the cook's shanty, where the greatest consternation soon prevailed.

Viola came near fainting at sight of the blood, and John Granger and his wife were horrified beyond measure.

"You asked how it happened," groaned Gabriel Grout, after his wound had been dressed. "I only know that I was assaulted by that hunter and stabbed."

"Tom Hasty?"

"Yes."

"Where did it happen?"

"In the woods shortly after we released the scamp."

Then wounded man was unable to proceed farther then.

In the meantime Tom was conducted to the men's shanty. The whole crew were roused to a fever pitch of excitement now. The evidence of Tom's guilt was too strong to admit of a doubt.

Even Joe Long had no power to stay the hands of the enraged shantymen, who had seen the scaler wounded, perhaps dying, with Tom Hasty standing over him. This, in connection with the fact of the hunter's having Nick Doane's rifle, quite substantiated his guilt in both instances.

"Tom, my boy, this looks mighty dark," said Joe Long, as he pressed the young man's hand. "It seems you were taken in the act this time."

"It seems so."

"You admit your guilt?" cried Joe.

"No. But there's no use arguing with the crowd," said Tom, loftily.

"If I die, Gabriel Grout will have both murder and perjury to answer for in the next world, if not in this."

"This ere fine talk don't go down no more," sneered Hod Posy, who had been fixing a point overhead for the adjusting of a rope. "We'll hang yer nicely, my boy. Thar ain't nothin' kin save ye this time."

"Don't insult the poor fellow," cried Joe. "His situation's bad enough 'thout tantalizin' him besides."

"Shut up, Joe Long. You're outer this case now. Law an' justice's goin' ter take its course, an' don't you forget it."

A rope was adjusted 'bout the victim's neck, and one end pushed through a hole over a log that formed a portion of the shanty roof.

"Now then, hoist 'im up, boys."

A wild scream filled the shanty, just as these orders fell from the lips of Hod Posy, and the next instant white-faced, with streaming hair and wild eyes, Viola Day appeared before the lynchers.

"You must not hang him—he is innocent," cried the maiden, clinging to the arm of Joe Long for support, and turning her blue eyes appealingly upon Posy.

"No, ma'am, we know better——"

"But Gabriel Grout says so. Oh, you must stop this horrid work, you must believe me," gasped Viola wildly.

"String 'im up, boys."

"Hold," cried Joe Long. "There is something to this. The hunter must not die until we see Gabriel Grout."

"Cussed nonsense," growled Hod.

"But, sir," persisted Viola, who was recovering her strength, "he believes he is dying, and he has sent for you, Mr. Posy. Surely you will not refuse the prayer of a dying man."

"This ain't no trick."

"No—no, go, in Heaven's name!"

"All right," growled the chopper. "I'll come back in a few minutes, an' then we'll finish the job."

While the men were discussing this new phase in the affair, Viola slipped to the side of Tom Hasty, and severed his bands with a keen knife she had brought with her for the purpose.

"Flee," she whispered. "My ruse was successful, and your life depends on instant flight."

"It was only a ruse then?"

"Yes, yes; go. Ah, Heavens, you are too late."

"He cannot go. Your lie won't save the murderer," cried one of the shanty-men, as he grasped Tom by the arm, a signal for others to follow suit.

Viola shrank back appalled.

Once more strong hands seized the rope.

"Up with him, lads."

"Stop," commanded Joe Long. "Wait till Hod returns."

"'Twas a lie the gal told," cried Jim Twist. "She said so herself."

A wrangle here ensued, lasting some minutes, when the lynchers carried the day and Tom Hasty was about to be launched into eternity, when Hod Posy and Mr. Granger suddenly burst into the room.

"Let the youngster go," cried Hod Posy; "he's innocent."

"Innocent?"

"Aye, innercent. Gabe Grout is dead. When dying he owned up. He killed Nick Doane, meanin' to murder Mr. Granger. He tried ter murder Mr. Tom Hasty, but missed his mark, and in the fight fell on his own knife. 'Twas all on 'count of the girl, Miss Viola, that this scamp did so much killin'."

The words of the chopper were confirmed by Mr. Granger, and Tom Hasty was triumphantly liberated, while the old shanty was made to ring with the wild, glad shouts of the loggers. During the excitement Dell and Indian Pete put in an appearance, and were soon sharing the general joy at Tom's triumphant acquittal.

We will not linger over this scene, dear reader. When Tom Hasty left the North Woods one month later, he bore with him Viola Day's promise to one day become his wife. And thus Tom's hunt met with greater reward than he expected when first he set foot in the northern wilderness.

[THE END.]

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